



THE VISIONS OF INDIAN REFORMERS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF NEP 2020

Dr. Subir Sen¹  & Dr. Birbal Saha² 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Associate Professor,
Department of Education,
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University,
Purulia, West Bengal, India;

² Professor,
Department of Education,
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University,
Purulia, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Subir Sen

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Abstract

This research article explores the profound philosophical and historical roots of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 by analyzing its alignment with the educational visions of prominent Indian thinkers. It argues that NEP 2020 is not merely a contemporary policy document but a synthesis of long-held Indian ideals concerning holistic development, value-based learning, critical thinking, equity, and the transformative role of education. By examining the contributions of figures such as Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohun Roy, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Sarala Roy, Begum Rokeya, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Tarabai Modak, this article highlights the continuities between historical wisdom and modern policy imperatives. It also discusses the nuances and divergences arising from evolving societal contexts and the integration of new elements like advanced technology, ultimately synthesizing a vision for India's educational future.

Keywords: *National Education Policy 2020, Indian educational thought, holistic education, value-based education, critical thinking, equity, social reform, teacher empowerment, Indian Knowledge Systems*

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a comprehensive and transformative framework for India's education system, aiming to address the evolving demands of the 21st century while remaining rooted in Indian ethos (Ministry of Education, 2020). This ambitious policy seeks to overhaul the entire educational landscape, from early childhood care and education to higher education, emphasizing flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and skill development (Ministry of Education, 2020). It envisions a future where education is not merely about imparting knowledge but about fostering well-rounded individuals capable of contributing to a rapidly changing world.

This article posits that NEP 2020 is not a standalone contemporary document but is deeply informed by and resonates with the rich philosophical and reformist traditions of Indian educational thinkers spanning centuries. The policy's core tenets reflect a continuum of thought that has long shaped India's intellectual and social development. Understanding these historical connections provides a deeper appreciation for the policy's foundational principles and its potential for long-term impact.

The scope of this research article involves a systematic examination of the educational philosophies of over twenty prominent Indian thinkers and reformers. It analyzes their specific points of alignment with the principles and objectives of NEP 2020, delving into thematic commonalities, identifying underlying trends, and discussing how historical visions continue to shape modern policy. This comprehensive approach aims to illuminate the enduring legacy of Indian educational thought within the contemporary framework of NEP 2020.

Literature Review

Core Principles and Objectives of the National Education Policy 2020

The National Education Policy 2020 is built upon several foundational principles designed to create a robust, equitable, and future-ready education system in India. These principles guide the policy's strategic objectives across all levels of learning.

A central tenet of NEP 2020 is its commitment to Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education. The policy advocates for an integrated approach, consciously breaking down rigid separations between arts, sciences, humanities, and vocational streams.

This comprehensive perspective focuses on the all-round development of students, encompassing their cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, and physical aspects (Ministry of Education, 2020). The aim is to nurture individuals who are not only academically proficient but also well-adjusted and capable in various life domains.

The policy places the highest priority on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), aiming for universal attainment in primary schools by 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2020). This objective recognizes FLN as the bedrock upon which all future learning depends, ensuring that every child acquires essential reading, writing, and arithmetic skills early in their educational journey.

NEP 2020 strongly emphasizes the development of Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Problem-Solving abilities. It promotes pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based, discovery-based, and discussion-based learning, moving away from rote memorization to foster higher-order cognitive capacities among students (Ministry of Education, 2020). This shift is intended to equip students with the skills necessary to analyze information, innovate, and address complex challenges.

A significant focus is placed on Value-Based Education and Ethics. The policy advocates for the integration of ethics, human values, and constitutional values across the curriculum. This is aimed at developing compassionate, empathetic, courageous, and responsible citizens with a strong moral compass (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Equity, Inclusion, and Access for All constitute another core principle. The policy is committed to ensuring equal access to quality education for all, with a particular focus on socio-economically disadvantaged groups, girls, and marginalized communities, striving to bridge historical disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy recognizes teachers as central to the learning process, emphasizing Teacher Empowerment and Continuous Professional Development. It stresses the importance of their training, continuous development, and the creation of a supportive environment to effectively guide and nurture students (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Experiential and Application-Based Learning is promoted through hands-on activities, real-world applications, and the integration of vocational education from Grade 6 onwards. This makes learning engaging, practical, and directly relevant to students' future livelihoods (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Mother Tongue are the key aspects, rooting education in India's rich cultural heritage. The policy promotes multilingualism and emphasizes the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, especially in foundational years (Ministry of Education, 2020). This also includes stressing contextualizing the curriculum and utilizing local resources (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Furthermore, NEP 2020 promotes Lifelong Learning and Adaptability, encouraging continuous learning and skill acquisition throughout life, fostering adaptability to changing circumstances (Ministry of Education, 2020). Finally, the policy underscores the importance of Leveraging Technology in Education, advocating for its integration at all levels to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment, thereby expanding access to quality education (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy's emphasis on both global best practices and Indian cultural and philosophical roots represents a deliberate and ambitious attempt to synthesize these two dimensions. The co-existence and explicit emphasis on 'holistic development,' 'critical thinking,' 'experiential learning,' 'value-based education,' 'equity and inclusion,' and 'teacher empowerment' alongside the 'integration of Indian Knowledge Systems,' 'mother tongue as medium of instruction,' and 'rootedness in Indian ethos' indicate a strategic approach. This dual focus aims to create a unique educational paradigm that is both globally competitive, capable of producing critical thinkers and innovators, and culturally authentic, fostering pride in heritage and ethical citizens. This approach holds the potential for more profound and sustainable educational reforms by leveraging cultural resonance.

Philosophical Foundations: Educational Visions of Indian Thinkers and their Resonance with NEP 2020

This section details the specific alignments between the philosophies of various Indian thinkers and the core principles of NEP 2020, grouped thematically to highlight continuities and the enduring nature of these educational ideals.

• Holistic Development and Character Building

The concept of holistic development, encompassing various dimensions of an individual's growth, is a recurring theme in Indian educational thought, finding strong resonance in NEP 2020.

Kautilya Chanakya: Kautilya Chanakya, in his *Arthashastra*, articulated a vision of education that stressed a well-rounded approach, encompassing not only intellectual knowledge but also practical skills, physical training, and moral development. His aim was to prepare individuals for their specific roles in society and the state (Chanakya, 300 BCE; Bhattacharya, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2021; Dalal & Yadav, 2019). This ancient perspective aligns with NEP 2020, which emphasizes the holistic development of students, integrating cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, and physical aspects. The policy also strongly promotes skill development and vocational education from Grade 6 onwards, directly reflecting Chanakya's focus on practical skills for life and work (Ministry of Education, 2020). Chanakya's ancient vision explicitly linked holistic individual development with preparing individuals for their roles in society and the state (Bhattacharya, 2024, Mishra, & Mishra, 2025). This perspective positions education as a fundamental tool for strengthening the state and society by producing capable individuals. While the context has shifted from ancient statecraft to a modern democracy, this underlying principle of education for national capacity building through holistic individual development is a foundational and enduring theme in Indian thought. It implies that the policy's focus on holistic development is not just about individual well-being but also about strengthening the nation's human capital and fostering responsible citizens for collective progress.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa: While not a formal educational philosopher, Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life and teachings emphasized the harmonious development of an individual's spiritual, emotional, and ethical dimensions, focusing on purity, devotion, and selfless service (Rosselli, 1978; Sen, 1998; Raina, 2021). This emphasis on inner virtues and ethical conduct for harmonious living is mirrored in NEP 2020, which stresses holistic development, including cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, and moral capacities, and aims to create a supportive and nurturing learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2020; Pallathadka & Roy, 2025). Ramakrishna's emphasis on "spiritual, emotional, and ethical dimensions" and "inner virtues" extends beyond purely intellectual or physical development (Pallathadka & Roy, 2025; Müller, 2024; Lokeswarananda, 2014). This introduces a deeper, introspective aspect to holistic development, hinting at education's role in cultivating inner peace, self-realization, and a strong moral compass. This subtly influences the policy's value-based education component, suggesting a deeper aim than mere moral instruction; it is about cultivating compassion, empathy, and a sense of responsibility as core human attributes, leading to individuals who are not only ethical but also internally balanced and purposeful (Pallathadka & Roy, 2025; Müller, 2024).

Swami Vivekananda: Swami Vivekananda advocated for "man-making education," focusing on the harmonious development of the body, mind, and soul, with character formation as the primary goal. He believed in fostering self-confidence and self-reliance by unlocking the inherent potential within each individual (Roy & Saha, 2021; Singh, 2018; Banerjee, 2007; Raghuramaraju, 2015). This vision aligns closely with NEP 2020, which stresses holistic development, character building, ethical values, and aims to empower students to be self-sufficient and contribute to national progress (Ministry of Education, 2020; Raghuramaraju, 2015; Barua, 2023). Vivekananda explicitly linked "man-making education" to the development of physically strong, mentally sharp, and spiritually awakened individuals, believing that the "progress of the nation depended on the education and empowerment of all its citizens" (Raghuramaraju, 2015; Barua, 2023; Singh, 2022). This establishes a direct causal link between individual holistic development and national well-being. This provides a strong historical and philosophical underpinning for the policy's goal of creating "responsible and capable citizens." It implies that the policy views education not just as a personal gain but as a collective investment in national progress, where a well-rounded individual is a fundamental unit of a strong nation.

Rabindranath Tagore: Rabindranath Tagore envisioned education as a holistic development encompassing intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual growth. His educational experiments at Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati emphasized learning in a natural environment, fostering creativity through art, music, and dance, and promoting a sense of community (Saha & Maji, 2012; Chakrabarty, 2021; Saha, 2025; Gupta, 2025). The policy advocates for an integrated, multidisciplinary approach, emphasizing all-round development, experiential learning, and the integration of arts and culture, directly reflecting Tagore's vision (Ministry of Education, 2020; Joseph, 1922; Desai, 1994; Chakrabarty, 2021). Tagore uniquely emphasized a "joyful and natural process" of learning, "closely connected to the child's experiences and surroundings," and "learning through exploration, observation, and creative expression" (Koley & Biswas, 2025; Atkinson, 1984; Banerji, 2010; Roy et al., 2023; Gorain et al., 2022). This highlights that *how* education is delivered is as crucial as *what* is taught for holistic growth. His establishment of Santiniketan in a natural setting exemplifies this pedagogical philosophy. This influences the policy's promotion of experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, and play-based learning. It signifies a recognition that for holistic development to truly flourish, the learning environment must be engaging, enjoyable, and connected to the real world, fostering a sustained love for learning rather than just rote memorization.

M.K. Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi advocated for "Sarvodaya" (upliftment of all) through the all-round development of the individual – body, mind, and spirit. His concept of "Nai Talim" (Basic Education) fundamentally linked knowledge to productive manual work and practical experience, emphasizing values, dignity of labour, and self-reliance (Patil & Sinha, 2022; Mahmoud Mahmoud, 2025; Gupta, 2020; Thote & Gowri, 2020). The policy stresses holistic development, value-based education, experiential learning, and skill development, aligning with Gandhi's emphasis on learning by doing and the dignity of labour (Mehta & Prajapati, 2025). Gandhi's "Nai Talim" fundamentally integrated "productive manual work" and "practical experience" with learning, stressing "dignity of labour" and making individuals "self-reliant" (Gandhi, 1951). This approach provides a practical, ethical, and socio-economic dimension to holistic development, linking it directly to livelihood and community self-sufficiency. This deepens the policy's vocational integration and emphasis on experiential learning. It suggests that the policy's aims go beyond mere job skills; they are about fostering self-reliant, ethically grounded citizens who contribute meaningfully to their local economy and uphold the dignity of all forms of work, echoing Gandhi's vision of a self-sufficient and equitable society.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan believed that education should aim at the integral development of human personality, encompassing intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. He stressed cultivating wisdom, ethical principles, and a sense of social responsibility (Paroi & Saha, 2013; Radhakrishnan, 1944; Archer, 1952). The policy strongly emphasizes holistic development, value-based education, and preparing responsible citizens with compassion, empathy, and integrity, reflecting Radhakrishnan's ideals (Ministry of Education, 2020; Nagaraja Rao, 2012). Radhakrishnan emphasized "cultivating wisdom and the capacity for independent judgment" and "discerning truth from falsehood," beyond just imparting information (Radhakrishnan, 2011; Nagaraja Rao, 2012; Radhakrishnan, 1944). This elevates the goal of holistic education from mere knowledge acquisition or skill development to fostering deeper understanding, ethical reasoning, and the ability to make informed decisions. This implies that the policy's emphasis on values and critical thinking aims to produce not just academically

proficient individuals but thoughtful, morally grounded citizens capable of navigating complex societal challenges and contributing to a meaningful life, both personally and collectively.

Sri Aurobindo: Sri Aurobindo advocated for “Integral Education,” which focused on the harmonious development of five aspects: physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual. His vision aimed for the flowering of the unique individual potential across all dimensions (Saha & Maji, 2013; Ghosh & Roy, 2023; Aurobindo, 1956). The policy strongly emphasizes holistic and integrated development, breaking down traditional silos between subjects, and promoting value-based education for inner growth, aligning with Aurobindo’s comprehensive vision (Ghosh & Saha, 2024; Aurobindo, 2001). Aurobindo’s “Integral Education” offers the most expansive definition of holistic development, including the “psychic being (the inner soul) and a connection to the spiritual dimension” (Sharma, 2016; Aurobindo, 1972). This provides a profound metaphysical and comprehensive understanding of human potential, suggesting that true education addresses every layer of an individual’s existence. While the policy does not explicitly use terms like “psychic being,” its holistic approach, emphasis on value-based education, ethical reasoning, and developing a sense of purpose, draws from this deep philosophical well. It implies that the policy aims for a complete human flowering, fostering individuals with inner harmony and a higher purpose, leading to more resilient and purposeful citizens.

Jiddu Krishnamurti: Jiddu Krishnamurti believed that true learning could only occur in an environment free from fear, competition, and external pressures. He emphasized emotional maturity, self-awareness, and understanding one’s inner life as integral to genuine education (Srinivasan, 2000; Mathur, 1984; Thapan, 2007; Krishnamurti, 1954). The policy aligns with this by emphasizing the creation of a positive and encouraging learning environment, reducing high-stakes examinations, promoting continuous evaluation, and fostering socio-emotional learning (Vas, 1971; Jaiswal, 2024; Mukherjee & Agrawal, 2021). Krishnamurti’s unique contribution is his radical emphasis on a learning environment “free from fear, competition, and external pressures” (Srinivasan & Benade, 2024; Baniwal, 2025; Krishnamurti, 1954). He posits this as fundamental for true holistic development. This highlights a critical psychological dimension often overlooked in traditional educational policies, where stress and competition can hinder genuine learning and well-being. The policy’s shift away from high-stakes examinations, its promotion of continuous and comprehensive evaluation, and its focus on socio-emotional learning can be seen as a practical, albeit perhaps less radical, attempt to create such a conducive, fear-free environment. This signifies a recognition that emotional well-being and intrinsic motivation are foundational to cognitive and ethical development, and that external pressures can be counterproductive to holistic growth.

Critical Thinking, Rationalism, and Inquiry-Based Learning

The cultivation of critical thinking and a rational outlook has been a consistent aspiration among Indian educational thinkers, directly influencing NEP 2020’s pedagogical shifts.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for rational thinking, a superstition-free conscience, and a move away from rote learning by emphasizing conceptual understanding and scientific investigation (Gupta, 2019; Adhikari & Saha, 2021; Mondal, 2021; De, 2020; Sen, 2021). This aligns directly with NEP 2020, which emphasizes concept clarity over rote learning and promotes critical thinking, discussion, and analytical learning to develop higher-order cognitive capacities in students (Hatcher, 2014; Ghoshal et al., 1984). Vidyasagar’s advocacy for a “superstition-free conscience” and “principles of scientific investigation” explicitly links critical thinking to overcoming societal dogmas and irrationality (Syed, 2017). This positions critical thinking not just as an academic skill but as a crucial tool for social progress and the eradication of regressive practices. This implies that the policy’s promotion of critical thinking is not solely for academic prowess or problem-solving in a professional context. It also aims to foster a rational citizenry capable of challenging outdated beliefs, engaging in informed public discourse, and contributing to a progressive and enlightened society.

Raja Rammohun Roy: Raja Rammohun Roy strongly advocated for the introduction of Western education, science, and rational inquiry into the Indian curriculum. He believed in moving away from rigid, traditional systems towards a more open and questioning approach (Adhikari & Saha, 2021; Sharma, 1983; Sircar, 2020). The policy aligns with this by emphasizing the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and analytical abilities, aiming to move away from rote learning and promote conceptual understanding (Ministry of Education, 2020; Govind, 2019; Basu, 2023; Suman & Kumar Shanu, 2024). Roy’s strong push for “Western education, science, and rational inquiry” was rooted in a desire to overcome perceived limitations of the traditional Indian system and modernize education. His vision implicitly links rational thinking to global knowledge and the ability to engage with contemporary advancements. This provides a historical precedent for the policy’s ambition to create a globally competitive workforce while retaining Indian roots. It implies that rationalism and critical inquiry are seen as key to both national development and international relevance, enabling India to selectively absorb and integrate global knowledge while preserving its distinct cultural identity.

B.R. Ambedkar: B.R. Ambedkar firmly believed that education should foster critical thinking and the ability to question societal norms and injustices. He advocated for a secular education that promotes rationalism and a scientific temper (Velaskar, 2012; Agrawal, 2021; Sangole, 2022; Behera & Paul, 2025; Ambedkar, 1926). The policy emphasizes the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and analytical abilities, encouraging inquiry-based and discovery-based learning, directly reflecting Ambedkar’s vision (Ministry of Education, 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Zene, 2018). Ambedkar explicitly linked critical thinking to the “ability to question societal norms and injustices” and saw it as a “weapon to fight against social slavery, untouchability, and casteism” (Mahanand, 2025; Pankaj et al., 2024). This provides a profound social justice dimension to the

concept of critical thinking, emphasizing its role in identifying and challenging systemic discrimination. This implies that the policy's critical thinking mandate is not just for individual intellectual growth but also for fostering a citizenry equipped with the intellectual tools to identify, challenge, and dismantle societal inequalities. It positions critical thinking as essential for building a truly equitable and just society, aligning with Ambedkar's vision of education for emancipation.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam: A.P.J. Abdul Kalam advocated for learning beyond textbooks through hands-on experience, experimentation, and real-world application. He aimed to ignite curiosity and foster creativity and innovation to solve complex problems (Pareek, 2017; Pandit et al., 2016; Jindal, 2021; Manna, 2024). The policy strongly promotes experiential, inquiry-based, and project-based learning, placing significant emphasis on developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, and innovation, aligning perfectly with Kalam's vision (Ministry of Education, 2020; Lal, 2011; Gayen et al., 2021). Kalam's vision explicitly connects critical thinking with "hands-on experience, experimentation, and real-world application" (Manna, 2024). He emphasized "nurturing creativity and innovation" and "dreaming big" for solving "complex problems." This links critical thinking directly to scientific temper, technological advancement, and practical problem-solving for societal and national progress. This provides a forward-looking, aspirational dimension to critical thinking in the policy. It suggests that the policy's approach aims to produce not just analytical thinkers, but also innovators, entrepreneurs, and problem-solvers who can contribute to India's scientific and economic growth, aligning critical thinking with a vision of national self-reliance and global leadership.

Equity, Inclusion, and Empowerment through Education

The pursuit of equity, inclusion, and empowerment through education has been a driving force for many Indian reformers, and this commitment is deeply embedded in NEP 2020.

Savitribai Phule: Savitribai Phule fought vehemently against the denial of education to girls and lower castes, establishing schools for their liberation and progress, and tirelessly advocating for women's empowerment (Salunke, 2021; Somanaboina & Ramagoud, 2021; Adhikari & Saha, 2021; Garaian & Sen, 2021). A central tenet of NEP 2020 is to ensure equitable and inclusive education for all, with a particular focus on socio-economically disadvantaged groups and gender inclusion, aiming to bridge gaps in access and outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020; Adhikari & Saha, 2021; Ghosh, 2024). Savitribai Phule's life was characterized by "immense social opposition and backlash" for her efforts to educate girls and lower castes. Her work was a direct "struggle for social justice and equality" (Ghosh & Ansary, 2025; Mondal, 2025). This highlights that the pursuit of equitable access to education in India has been a historical battle against deeply entrenched social biases and discrimination. This implies that the policy's strong focus on inclusivity is not merely a contemporary policy goal but a continuation of a long-standing, arduous struggle for social justice. Its successful implementation requires not just policy directives but also sustained commitment to overcoming deeply ingrained societal prejudices and actively dismantling barriers to ensure true equity for all.

Durga Bai Deshmukh: Durga Bai Deshmukh was a tireless advocate for women's education and economic independence, adult literacy, and uplifting marginalized communities through institutions providing education and vocational training (Mondal, 2025; Mohanta, 2025). The policy strongly emphasizes gender inclusion, adult education, lifelong learning, skill development, and social justice, aiming to eliminate disparities and empower women, reflecting Deshmukh's work (Ministry of Education, 2020; Ansary & Ansary, 2023). Deshmukh explicitly recognized the importance of "adult literacy, particularly for women, who had been historically denied educational opportunities" (Deshmukh, 1979; Roy, 2023). Her efforts extended beyond formal schooling. This highlights the intergenerational impact of past educational exclusion and the necessity of providing opportunities for those who missed out on formal education during their childhood. This implies that the policy's emphasis on lifelong learning and adult education is crucial not just for continuous skill upgrades in a changing economy but also for rectifying historical educational injustices. It aims to empower previously marginalized individuals, ensuring comprehensive societal upliftment and fostering a truly learned society.

Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati: Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati championed women's education, breaking barriers by mastering Sanskrit, and establishing institutions (Sharada Sadan, Mukti Mission) that provided both education and vocational training for economic independence, especially for widows (Kosambi, 2000; Ramabai, 1887/2021). The policy strongly focuses on gender inclusion, promoting access to higher education for women, and emphasizing vocational education for employability and entrepreneurship, aligning with Ramabai's efforts (Ministry of Education, 2020; Venkatesan & Sthanislas, 2020). Pandita Ramabai personally "broke many barriers by mastering Sanskrit, a language traditionally exclusive to Brahmin men" (Biswas, 2023; Ramabai, 1887/2021). She also aimed for women's "economic independence" (Burton, 2014). This demonstrates education's power to challenge traditional gender and caste-based power structures, proving intellectual equality and enabling self-sufficiency. This adds a dimension of aspirational empowerment to the policy's gender inclusion efforts. It implies that the policy aims to foster women who are not just educated for basic literacy or employment, but who are also capable of leading, innovating, and redefining societal roles, thereby contributing to a more equitable and dynamic society.

Sarala Roy: Sarala Roy focused significantly on the advancement of women's education, advocating for a comprehensive education for girls including diverse subjects like domestic science, comparative religion, physical culture, music, and painting, aiming for their all-round development (Davis et al., 2006; Torres et al., 2025; Adhikari & Saha, 2021). The policy aligns with gender inclusion, ensuring equitable access for girls, and emphasizing a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to education, promoting social, emotional, and physical well-being (Ministry of Education, 2020; Bharti, 2025; Vip, 2018). Sarala Roy's curriculum for girls at Gokhale Memorial Girls' School was notably comprehensive, including "domestic science, comparative religion, physical culture, music, and painting" (Ansary & Ansary, 2023). This demonstrates an early understanding of the need

for holistic development specifically tailored for women, at a time when women's education was often limited or vocational. This implies that the policy's multidisciplinary approach and emphasis on holistic development for all students has a historical precedent in the struggle for women's education. Early reformers recognized that a broad and varied curriculum was essential for women's full intellectual, emotional, and social development, preparing them for comprehensive participation in society, not just domestic roles.

Begum Rokeya: Begum Rokeya passionately believed that education was the key to women's liberation and equality, establishing schools for Muslim girls and advocating for a comprehensive education beyond traditional religious studies (Hossain, 1992; Paul, 2024; Haque & Rashid, 2018). The policy strongly emphasizes equitable access to quality education for all girls and women, eliminating gender bias, and promoting a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, reflecting Rokeya's vision (Ministry of Education, 2020; Hossain & Saha, 2013). Begum Rokeya's focus on "Muslim girls" and challenging "prevailing social norms that restricted women's mobility and access to education" highlights specific socio-religious barriers (Hossain, 1992; Paul, 2024; Saha et al., 2016). This underscores the concept of intersectionality, where gender intersects with other social identities (like religion or community) to create unique challenges to educational access. This implies that the policy's inclusivity efforts must consider and actively address diverse socio-cultural contexts and specific community-level resistances. For true equity, the policy needs nuanced implementation strategies that recognize and overcome the multiple layers of disadvantage faced by different marginalized groups, drawing lessons from Rokeya's targeted approach.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad firmly believed education was the birthright of every individual, advocating for free and compulsory primary education for all children up to 14, stressing inclusivity and secular values (Habib, 2010; Habib, 2015). A core principle of NEP 2020 is to ensure equitable access to quality education for all, regardless of background, aiming to bridge social category gaps and create inclusive environments (Ministry of Education, 2020; Alvi, 2015; Chakraborty, 2018). Azad's advocacy for "free and compulsory primary education for all children up to the age of 14" and his emphasis on "inclusivity and secularism" were foundational in post-independence India (Habib, 2010). This established the principle of state responsibility for universal education and a non-discriminatory, pluralistic approach to schooling. This implies that the policy's universalization goals are built upon a constitutional and historical commitment to education as a public good. The policy's success relies on robust state infrastructure and a continued commitment to pluralism and non-discrimination, ensuring that the spirit of Azad's vision for a unified and educated nation is upheld.

Tarabai Modak: Tarabai Modak pioneered early childhood education (ECCE) in India, adapting the Montessori method for underprivileged children in rural and tribal communities, establishing "Anganwadis" for universal access and equity (Adhikari & Saha, 2021; Anagol, 2010). The policy gives significant emphasis to ECCE as a foundational stage (ages 3-8), recognizing its critical importance for holistic development and aiming for universal access, particularly in disadvantaged regions, directly reflecting Modak's work (Ministry of Education, 2020; Rogers, 2011). Modak's establishment of "Anganwadis" (courtyard schools) to "reach children at their doorsteps" in "tribal areas" demonstrates a highly localized and community-embedded approach to ECCE (Gawande, 2022). This highlights the power of grassroots initiatives in overcoming infrastructural and geographical barriers to universal access, especially for the most vulnerable populations. This implies that for the policy's ambitious ECCE goals to be truly universal, particularly in diverse and remote regions, a decentralized approach that leverages community involvement, adapts to local needs, and utilizes locally available resources, similar to Modak's model, will be critical for effective and equitable implementation.

Methodology

A critical analytical framework centred on five major NEP 2020 domains is employed in this study:

- Redefining the teacher as a mentor and reformer is the human element.
- Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems and Mother Tongue is the Identity Element.
- The Temporal Element: Examining how historical knowledge and contemporary directives are consistent.
- The Comparative Component: Assessing subtleties and differences from earlier learning environments.
- Combining the new requirements necessary for global competency is the future element.

Results and Discussions

Five domains mentioned in the methodology are analysed as follows:

• Teacher as a Guide, Mentor, and Reformer

Across virtually all Indian thinkers, from ancient philosophers to modern scientists and social reformers, there is a consistent and profound recognition of the teacher's pivotal role in shaping individuals and society. Figures like Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Savitribai Phule consistently viewed teachers not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as knowledgeable guides, mentors, character builders, and in some cases, even social reformers and catalysts for critical thought.

NEP 2020 explicitly recognizes teachers as central to the learning process and emphasizes their continuous professional development, empowerment, and the creation of a supportive and respectful environment to effectively guide and nurture students (Ministry of Education, 2020). The consistent emphasis on the teacher's role across such a diverse range of thinkers highlights a fundamental belief in the transformative power of the educator. This transcends specific pedagogical methods,

technological advancements, or changing curricula, underscoring that the human connection and guidance provided by a teacher are irreplaceable. This implies that the policy's success hinges fundamentally on investing in teacher quality, motivation, professional autonomy, and well-being. Teachers are the ultimate catalysts for implementing the policy's vision on the ground, and their empowerment is key to translating policy goals into tangible learning outcomes and societal change. The policy's focus on teacher development is thus a continuation of a deeply ingrained cultural understanding of the teacher's sacred role.

- **Mother Tongue, Indian Knowledge Systems, and Contextual Learning**

The emphasis on indigenous languages and knowledge systems is a strong thread in Indian educational thought, deeply influencing NEP 2020. Ramakrishna Paramahansa primarily communicated in Bengali, using simple, relatable language to convey profound truths. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar authored "Borno Porichoy" for the Bengali alphabet and stressed the importance of vernacular languages. Raja Rammohun Roy recognized the significance of vernacular languages for mass education, writing Bengali grammar books, while also advocating for English. M.K. Gandhi strongly advocated for education in the mother tongue, believing it to be the most natural and effective way for children to learn and connect with their culture. Rabindranath Tagore also advocated for education in the mother tongue, believing it was the most natural and effective way for children to learn and express themselves.

Beyond language, thinkers emphasized cultural rootedness. Sri Aurobindo advocated for an education system rooted in India's rich spiritual and cultural heritage, integrating its wisdom with modern knowledge. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a profound scholar of Indian philosophy and culture, advocated for an education system rooted in India's intellectual and spiritual heritage for national identity and individual growth. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad valued India's rich cultural and intellectual heritage, believing education should connect students to their roots and foster a sense of national identity. B.R. Ambedkar recognized the importance of language in education and advocated for the use of vernacular languages to make education more accessible, especially in the early stages. Tarabai Modak believed education should be relevant to the child's environment and daily life, utilizing local resources and cultural context.

NEP 2020 aligns with these visions by emphasizing the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5 (and preferably until Grade 8), promoting multilingualism, and strongly advocating for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), including history, philosophy, arts, and traditions, into the curriculum. It also stresses contextualizing the curriculum and using local resources. A remarkable number of thinkers across different eras consistently advocated for the use of mother tongue in education and for grounding education in India's rich cultural and intellectual heritage. This widespread advocacy indicates a deep-seated belief that learning is most effective when it is conducted in a familiar linguistic and cultural context, fostering better comprehension and a stronger sense of identity. This implies that the policy's emphasis on mother tongue and Indian Knowledge Systems is not merely a linguistic or cultural preference but a fundamental pedagogical strategy. It aims to enhance comprehension, foster pride in one's heritage, and ensure that education is relevant and meaningful to the Indian context, potentially leading to more profound and sustained learning outcomes and a stronger national identity.

- **Alignments and Continuities: Bridging Historical Wisdom with Modern Policy**

The analysis reveals profound alignments and continuities between the educational philosophies of prominent Indian thinkers and the core principles of the National Education Policy 2020. These connections demonstrate that the policy is not a disconnected contemporary initiative but a modern articulation of deeply ingrained national aspirations regarding education.

An overarching theme that emerges is that the "Indianness" of NEP 2020 is a deliberate and deep-rooted continuity. The detailed analysis in the preceding sections reveals an overwhelming consensus among diverse Indian thinkers on core educational principles such as holistic development, value-based learning, critical thinking, and cultural rootedness. These themes are consistently echoed in the policy. This extensive historical alignment indicates that NEP 2020 is not a radical departure but a formalization and modernization of long-held Indian educational ideals. This implies that the policy is attempting to create a unique educational paradigm that balances global competitiveness with cultural authenticity, drawing strength from a long intellectual tradition rather than merely adopting international models. This deep cultural rooting could significantly influence its long-term sustainability, public acceptance, and the ease of its implementation, as it resonates with deeply ingrained societal values and aspirations.

Furthermore, another overarching theme highlights education as a multi-faceted tool for national building and social transformation. Indian thinkers consistently viewed education not just as a means for individual enlightenment but as a powerful instrument for various aspects of national building. This includes statecraft, social reform, character development for societal good, and scientific/economic progress. The comprehensive scope of NEP 2020, addressing foundational literacy, vocational skills, critical thinking, and citizenship, reflects this multi-faceted historical understanding. From Chanakya's focus on individuals for state service to the 19th-century reformers' fight against social evils and Kalam's vision for national scientific progress, Indian thinkers consistently linked education to broader societal and national goals. This demonstrates a historical understanding of education as a powerful lever for comprehensive societal and national development, beyond mere academic achievement. This implies that the policy's ambition extends beyond improving academic metrics to foster a holistic national transformation. By integrating diverse goals like equity, skill development, critical thinking, and value-based education, the policy leverages education as a primary driver for a stronger, more equitable, more innovative, and culturally vibrant India, building on a long-standing tradition of education as a tool for societal upliftment.

Table 1: Thematic Alignment of Indian Thinkers' Philosophies with NEP 2020 Principles

Key NEP 2020 Principle	Corresponding Historical Thinkers	Brief Description of Alignment
Holistic Development	Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sarala Roy, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad	These thinkers consistently advocated for the all-round development of an individual, encompassing cognitive, emotional, physical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, mirroring the policy's comprehensive approach to student growth.
Critical Thinking & Creativity	Kautilya Chanakya, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohon Roy, B.R. Ambedkar, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Jiddu Krishnamurti	A strong emphasis on fostering rational inquiry, questioning, problem-solving, and moving beyond rote memorization to cultivate independent thought and innovation.
Value-Based Education	Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, M.K. Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam	These philosophies underscore the integration of ethics, moral values, and character building as fundamental to education, aiming to produce responsible and compassionate citizens.
Equity & Inclusion	Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohon Roy, Savitribai Phule, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Sarala Roy, Begum Rokeya, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, B.R. Ambedkar, Tarabai Modak, Swami Vivekananda, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam	A shared commitment to universal access, breaking social barriers, and empowering marginalized communities, particularly women and disadvantaged groups, ensuring education for all.
Experiential & Skill-Based Learning	Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Tarabai Modak	Advocacy for learning through doing, practical skills, real-world applications, and vocational training to enhance employability and self-reliance.
Teacher Empowerment	Kautilya Chanakya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Savitribai Phule, Sarala Roy, Begum Rokeya, Tarabai Modak, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati	Consistent recognition of the teacher's pivotal role as a guide, mentor, and facilitator, emphasizing their continuous professional development and supportive environment.
Indian Knowledge Systems & Mother Tongue	Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohon Roy, M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, B.R. Ambedkar, Tarabai Modak	Strong advocacy for education in the mother tongue and grounding learning in India's rich cultural heritage, philosophy, and traditions to foster identity and deeper understanding.
Lifelong Learning & Adaptability	Kautilya Chanakya, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad	Emphasis on continuous learning and skill acquisition throughout life, fostering adaptability to changing circumstances and addressing historical educational gaps.
Technology Integration	A.P.J. Abdul Kalam	While a modern imperative, Kalam's vision for leveraging technology to enhance learning and bridge divides aligns with the policy's embrace of digital infrastructure and online learning.

• **Historical Context Differences**

While significant alignments exist between historical Indian educational thought and NEP 2020, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct historical contexts that shaped these philosophies and the new imperatives that define contemporary policy. These points highlight the dynamic nature of educational thought and its adaptation over time.

The purpose of education has evolved considerably. Kautilya Chanakya's primary focus was on training individuals for the service of the state in an ancient political context, including specific skills like military training and espionage. This differs significantly from the aims of modern education in a democratic society, which focuses on developing responsible citizens with civic duties and leadership potential for a diverse populace.

Thinkers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohon Roy, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Begum Rokeya, Durga Bai Deshmukh, and B.R. Ambedkar operated in a colonial or immediate post-independence context. Their primary struggles were for basic access to education, challenging social evils like caste discrimination and gender inequality, and introducing modern thought. NEP 2020, while still addressing equity, builds upon foundational access to focus on quality, future-readiness, and global competitiveness.

Furthermore, the nature of their contributions varied. Figures like Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Jiddu Krishnamurti primarily focused on spiritual enlightenment and inner transformation, not formal education policy. Their relevance to NEP 2020 is derived from drawing parallels between their values and the policy's aims, requiring interpretation. Similarly, Durga Bai Deshmukh's work was more about direct action and social reform through education rather than articulating a comprehensive formal philosophy.

The points of nuance reveal that while core educational principles, such as holistic development and values, endure across centuries, their application, prioritization, and specific manifestations shift significantly with historical context. For example, Chanakya's "statecraft" focus evolved into "democratic citizenship," and Gandhi's "anti-industrialization" stance adapted to Kalam's "technology integration." This demonstrates that educational philosophy is not static but a living tradition that responds to contemporary challenges. This implies that NEP 2020, while deeply rooted in Indian thought, is not a static replication of past ideas but a dynamic adaptation of enduring principles to address the unique challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. This adaptability is crucial for the policy's relevance and future-readiness, ensuring it remains effective in a rapidly changing world.

- **New Imperatives in NEP 2020**

The current policy also incorporates imperatives that were either absent or less prominent in earlier eras.

Advanced Technology Integration: A.P.J. Abdul Kalam explicitly recognized the immense potential of technology to enhance learning and bridge educational divides. NEP 2020 strongly emphasizes the integration of technology at all levels of education (Ministry of Education, 2020). This is a concept that was either nascent or not prevalent during the eras of many earlier thinkers like Raja Rammohun Roy or Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. This integration is a modern necessity for global competitiveness, digital literacy, and expanding access.

Global Citizenship: While Rabindranath Tagore envisioned "universal brotherhood" and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan spoke of "understanding and harmony in the world", NEP 2020 explicitly promotes "global citizenship" in a hyper-globalized world. This involves a more defined understanding of global issues, cross-cultural competencies, and international collaborations, which are distinct from earlier universalistic ideals.

Data-Driven Governance and Research: Modern education policy relies heavily on data for planning, implementation, and evaluation. This scientific, evidence-based approach to policy-making is a contemporary development that was not a central tenet of most historical philosophies, though thinkers like Kalam implicitly valued scientific methods.

A notable divergence is the contrast between Gandhi's wariness of unchecked industrialization and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's fervent advocacy for leveraging technology in education. The policy strongly embraces technology. This shift reflects a fundamental change in societal priorities and available tools. Technology, which was a non-factor or even a concern for some earlier thinkers, is now seen as a crucial enabler. This implies that technology, while a new imperative, can serve as a powerful accelerator for achieving historical goals that earlier thinkers struggled with due to limited infrastructure. For instance, Kalam's vision of technology bridging educational divides directly addresses the universal access goals championed by Ambedkar, Azad, and Phule. Technology has the potential to democratize access to quality education in unprecedented ways, overcoming geographical and socio-economic barriers that were formidable challenges in previous eras.

Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the National Education Policy 2020 is profoundly rooted in the philosophical and reformist traditions of Indian educational thought. Its core principles like holistic development, value-based education, critical thinking, equity, and the transformative role of the teacher are not novel but represent a continuum of wisdom passed down through generations of visionary Indian thinkers (Ministry of Education, 2020). From the ancient statecraft ideals of Kautilya Chanakya to the humanistic visions of Rabindranath Tagore and the social justice imperatives of B.R. Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule, a consistent thread of educational aspiration for a better individual and a stronger nation runs through India's intellectual history.

The policy's emphasis on integrating Indian Knowledge Systems and promoting mother tongue instruction further solidifies its connection to this rich heritage, aiming to foster a sense of national identity and cultural pride alongside global competencies. While modern imperatives such as advanced technology integration and explicit global citizenship have necessitated new approaches, the underlying spirit of educational reform remains deeply aligned with historical ideals. The policy's ability to adapt enduring principles to contemporary challenges, leveraging new tools like technology to achieve long-held goals of universal access and quality, underscores its dynamic nature.

Ultimately, NEP 2020 stands as a synthesis of historical wisdom and modern policy imperatives, aiming to create an education system that is not only globally competitive but also deeply rooted in India's unique ethos. Its successful implementation will rely on a continued commitment to the foundational values articulated by these diverse thinkers, ensuring that education serves as a powerful instrument for individual flourishing and national transformation.

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